

# Further destabilisation in the Middle East possible according to new report

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Map of the Middle East.

The crisis in Egypt is already having a negative effect on the Syrian civil war and contributing to further destabilisation of the wider Middle East according to a major new report.

Professor Gareth Stansfield from the University of Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute and the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies wrote the report, for the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), an independent think-tank for defence and security which advises governments and the wider policy community.

'The Remaking of Syria, Iraq and the Wider Middle East' report suggests that important as events in Cairo are, they distract Western attention from the much bigger game being played out in Syria which significantly risks changing the Levant after a century of relative territorial stability.

Professor Stansfield who is also an RUSI's senior associate fellow analysed the impact the Syrian civil war could have on the future of the Middle East state system across the Levant.

The report warns that ongoing conflict may prompt the [fragmentation](#) of the region's twentieth-century defined states. Professor Stansfield outlines how Lebanon, Jordan – and the interests of Israel and Turkey – could all be profoundly affected; but the most important casualty of the war is potentially Iraq, with inter-communal conflicts driven by deeply held and murderous sectarian hatreds that continue to stalk its [political landscape](#) today.

'Is Syria on the verge of [collapse](#)? And could Iraq, in particular – as well as Lebanon, Jordan and Israel – survive this eventuality? The answer is a tentative Yes to the first question and a probable No to the second,' writes Professor Stansfield.

'There seems to be growing regional and international acceptance of the possibility of erasing the once-rarefied, externally imposed boundaries that have divided peoples as much as they have united them, with greater emphasis on the need for state structures to be tied more authentically to the peoples they encompass.'

'Therefore, if it is now no longer possible to simultaneously maintain the integrity of the extant state system while advocating democratisation – which may result, among other things, in the removal of existing dictatorships – then a different, and even more worrying, set of questions need to be posed. The problem now is how to ensure that the ongoing, escalating instability in Syria and Iraq does not deteriorate further into a region-wide war.'

'This is not mere speculation. Jordan's delicate political stability is vulnerable to instabilities in its wider environment, while Lebanon

remains deeply fractured. Israeli action is increasingly plausible, both against Hizbullah in south Lebanon, now that the latter is actively involved in Syria, and against Iranian nuclear targets, now that Iran is pursuing its strategic interests through direct intervention in Iraq and Syria. In parallel, the Arab Gulf states are also intervening in Syria and Iraq, but by proxy. Meanwhile, renewed turmoil in Egypt adds fuel to the fire in Syria – encouraging regime and rebels alike – while threatening simultaneously to divert international attention. And all of this is happening within a context of wider inertia at the level of the international community, caused by an East-West stand-off in the UN Security Council, with Russia and China finally standing up to what they perceive to be neo-imperialist, high-handed Western strategy, expressed in an ex cathedra manner that they no longer deem acceptable.'

'Of far greater concern in Western capitals is the stability of Syria's Levantine neighbours – Lebanon, Jordan and, of course, Israel – not least because of their proximity to Europe. In particular, there is concern over the very real threat posed by the possibility of state failure or of the emergence of ungoverned space in Lebanon, which could easily be exploited by Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Sunni Islamist militants alike (although they would likely be as entertained by each other's presence as they would be by the presence of Israel to the south or Europe to the west). Similarly, the Kingdom of Jordan may prove unable to survive significant instability without substantial external help, while the possibility that Israel might be tempted – in an environment of geopolitical flux – to take provocative action to strengthen its borders and enhance its security is also of major concern to Western policy-makers.'

'In short, the future map of the Middle East is likely to be confused, confusing and changeable. Yet the legacies of twentieth-century states will prove difficult, if not impossible, to dispel, raising the question of who will be in control of the remnants of their structures, their narratives

and their futures. These are the pressing issues that Western states should now be addressing, rather than concerning themselves with the pitfalls of intervention in situations where the opportunity to usefully intervene has long since passed.'

Professor Michael Clarke, RUSI's Director-General, in his foreword to the study writes: 'A year ago, the war in Syria might have been constrained by strong Western action, but it is increasingly clear that the world is confronting a crisis that extends far beyond Syria, threatening to deteriorate into a regional conflict. Now part civil war, part proxy war, it has also become a great power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and between the US, Russia and China.'

'But with each passing month the conflict becomes more complex and diplomatically intractable, and the renewed crisis in Egypt will only make it worse,' Clarke writes.

'While the agony within Syria looks set to continue for some time to come, the Levant is on the verge of recasting itself around the epicentre of the crisis. Syria might eventually emerge from this trauma more or less intact as a state, but the same cannot be said for its neighbourhood. The winners and losers from Assad's [civil war](#) will extend far beyond Damascus, Homs and Aleppo.'

Provided by University of Exeter

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